

CHAPTER 3

The Character of Kings

Morkinskinna and *Fagrskinna*

“Áhugi á mannlýsingum hefur áhrif á formgerði sögunnar; lýsing konunganna verður saga Noregs.” Ármann Jakobsson, *Staður í nýjum heimi* [2002], 181)

(Attention to personal characterization determines the shape of the saga; the characterization of the kings becomes the history of Norway.)

Morkinskinna

Beginning a little after 1030, *Morkinskinna* covers the same span of history, at least up to 1157, as *Heimskringla* III, and was in fact the chief source for the last part of *Heimskringla*.¹ It is nonetheless distinctly different because of a series of stories usually referred to as *þættir* (strands). These stories most frequently focus on Icelandic visitors to the Norwegian court and are typically lively and humorous. They are often thought to be later interpolations into the text because they do not recur in the sibling redactions in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*, but Ármann Jakobsson has urged us to view them not as separate stories but as integral parts of the narrative as a whole.²

Their placement suggests that they have a summarizing or distilling function. Thus the “Story of Hreiðarr” is positioned near the end of the life of King Magnús the Good and illustrates the king’s common touch, his protectiveness, and his popularity with all classes. Similarly, the “Story of Halldórr Snorrason” is positioned near the beginning of Haraldr harðráði’s reign in Norway and pinpoints the striking contrast between King Haraldr and his predecessor King Magnús. Like the “Story of Hreiðarr” it focuses on a king and an Icelandic,

but it is considerably more pointed. In the “Story of Hreiðarr” King Magnús treats his Icelandic visitor with impressive forbearance and kindness, but in the “Story of Halldórr” King Haraldr mistreats and even cheats his faithful, albeit temperamental, Icelandic retainer quite unscrupulously. These interactions provide latitude not only for projecting admirable and less admirable royal qualities but also for emphasizing the importance and status of Icelanders in general. King Haraldr suffers by comparison with his coregent Magnús but also to some extent by comparison with his Danish rival Sveinn Úlfsson (Svend Estridsen), and this contrast is neatly abstracted in the “Story of Auðunn.” The relativity of royal standing is further tested in the “Story of Brandr the Open-Handed.”³ The Icелander Brandr gives Haraldr a rather bold lesson in generosity, although in Norse literature generosity is usually the prerogative of kings. The irony is further driven home by the explicit attribution of kingly qualities to Brandr, who is deemed worthy to be king of Iceland (ÍF 23:231).⁴

Even the story of how a young Icелander comes to Haraldr’s court and narrates the king’s adventures in the Mediterranean, the story that is perhaps most likely to be considered a separable digression, may claim a larger relevance.⁵ The Icелander is apprehensive about Haraldr’s reaction as he listens to a version of his own story, but the king judges that the teller has gotten the story exactly right. That may be the point of the story. It not only serves to sum up Haraldr’s early career but may, with a little semantic stretch, be understood as an oblique suggestion that it is the Icelanders who possess a true account of Norwegian history.

Another episode resembles the tale of Halldórr Snorrason since it returns to the theme of spurned or unrequited service. The Icелander Þorvarðr krákunef (Crow’s Beak) offers Haraldr a sail, but the king turns it down curtly, asserting that he has previously had a bad experience with an Icelandic sail.⁶ In contrast, Eysteinn orri of the distinguished clan of the Arnmœðlingar entertains Þorvarðr and readily accepts a gift of the sail, conferring a better reward than King Haraldr would have. The moral seems to be that a well-intentioned Icелander should not be underrated because he can go on to greater acknowledgment, or, once more generalizing, Icelandic success is not contingent on the Norwegian king.

Parallel to the little stories about Icelanders at court, though not

counted among them, is the narrative about the Norwegian chieftain's son Hákon Ívarsson. In due course this tale was developed into a full saga, of which only fragments have survived.⁷ In the context of *Morkinskinna*, however, it has a force similar to the Icelandic stories, such as the one about Halldórr Snorrason, because it illustrates the perils of taking service with King Haraldr. Hákon provides brilliant military support and is promised a distinguished marriage and a jarldom, but King Haraldr reneges, and Hákon must make his fortune in Denmark. Thus the "Story of Halldórr Snorrason" at the beginning and the story of Hákon at the end bracket a biography of King Haraldr that shows him to be an unreliable lord. It also elaborates on the experience of Icelandic retainers in the service of King Haraldr.

The supplementary stories cluster toward the end of Haraldr's life and combine to shed a particularly concentrated light on his character. Chief among them is the story of Sneglu-Halli (Sniping Halli).⁸ This is perhaps the most detailed and the most persistently amusing of all the auxiliary stories. They typically focus on one or two incidents, but the skald Halli is the protagonist of no fewer than five incidents. He sails into Trondheim by Agðanes (literally the promontory of Agði—a mythological giant?). As he does so, he encounters another ship and is addressed provocatively by a fine-looking man in a red cloak, who asks him whether old Agði has screwed him. Not at a loss for words, Halli replies in the negative and suggests that Agði is waiting for a better man (his interlocutor of course). The exchange has no further repercussions but sets the tone. Halli then introduces himself at Haraldr's court, where the distinguished Icelandic poet Þjóðólfr Arnórsson is also present. Þjóðólfr is jealous of his prerogatives and a certain tension between the two skalds soon surfaces. But before it comes to a head, Halli manages to alienate the king.

As the king's retinue walks down the street, Halli veers off to enter a house and gobble up some porridge, clearly a laughably inferior food. The king is displeased but defers his wrath until the evening when his courtiers are once more gathered in the royal hall. Here he orders the dwarfish Frisian Túta to cross the hall floor carrying a roasted pig to Halli, with the stipulation that Halli will lose his life unless he composes an appropriate stanza before the pig arrives. Halli recites the required stanza and is restored to the king's good graces, then avails himself of the truce to ask permission to declaim a poem

in the king's honor. Haraldr inquires whether he has ever composed a poem before, and he admits that he has not. Haraldr appeals to Þjóðólfr for advice and is told that Halli is lying because he did once compose a poem about the cows he herded as a boy. Halli retaliates by telling a story about Þjóðólfr's youthful "Ashcan Verses" and adding a spitefully funny story about how Þjóðólfr took revenge against a calf that caused his father's death by eating it. The matter is about to come to blows, but King Haraldr imposes peace.

The next incident provides an elaborate account of how Halli gets the best of the great chieftain and bully Einarr fluga (fly), who prides himself on never paying compensation for a killing. Einarr relates that he killed an Icelander on a ship that he suspected of poaching on the Lapp trade. Halli goes into a mock depression, pretending that the victim was his kinsman. He also enters into a wager with a courtier to the effect that he can extract compensation from Einarr. He fails twice to impose his will on Einarr, but in the third attempt he contrives a dream in which he is visited by the skald Þorleifr, who had once brought terrible distress on Hákon jarl Sigurðarson with incantatory magic.⁹ King Haraldr now intervenes to warn Einarr that he should not risk the same fate and should pay up. Einarr tries to trick Halli with an overpayment, the acceptance of which would make him criminally liable, but Halli is far too sly to be taken in and wins his wager.

In the final sequence Halli goes to Denmark and wins another wager by betting that he can silence a tumultuous thingmeeting. He does so by making a nonsensical announcement that puzzles everyone and causes them to desist from whatever they are doing and fall silent. From Denmark Halli travels to England where he earns a great surplus reward from the king with yet another ingenious trick.

There is no doubt truth in Ármann Jakobsson's contention that these little stories are not just random Icelandic intrusions in the kings' sagas but contribute no less importantly to the royal portraits. The story of Sniping Halli, however, comes closest to challenging that proposition. The tale is clearly centered on Halli, whereas there is very little about King Haraldr. He figures as a peacemaker between Halli and Þjóðólfr in the first phase, but he figures not at all toward the end. Nor is his one conciliatory moment consonant with his jocular obscenity at the outset or his mortal threat against Halli. It seems

most likely that there was a completely independent tradition about Halli that was added in for its own sake. The contention between Halli and Þjóðólfr shows that it is firmly rooted in Iceland, but even if it is only marginally about King Haraldr, it may still say something about the interface between Iceland and Norway.

We may note first of all that the story runs counter to the two most unflattering commonplaces voiced by the Norwegians about the Icelanders. The Icelanders are taxed with being slow and having an unrefined diet (they are “suet-eaters”).¹⁰ Halli mocks the latter charge when he exaggerates it by digging into too much porridge, and he belies the charge of slowness by being uniformly quick-worded and quick-witted. At the very outset he wins the miniature flyting with King Haraldr and he later exhibits an ability to compose verse instantaneously. Far from being slow-witted, he is exceptionally resourceful in devising tricks to get the best of more powerful men. But why would a king’s saga devote so much space to an Icelandic trickster?

Unlike Ármann Jakobsson, we might inquire not into the question of how Icelanders fit into royal biography but rather into the question of how Norwegian kings fit into an Icelandic frame of reference. The Icelanders in *Morkinskinna* are not incidental; they are active participants and a major presence. In the Óláfr sagas the authors were in some sense invisible royal servants. In *Morkinskinna*, on the other hand, the author claims a substantial part of the stage for his countrymen, who consequently have a not inconsiderable impact on the story line. Haraldr’s narrative might have been different if he had not had the benefit of his Icelandic lieutenant Halldórr Snorrason. Halldórr and the master diplomat Auðunn are serious participants in the shaping of events, while Hreiðarr and Halli are more humorous counterparts. They control not the events themselves but the discourse about the events, the tone of the story. That is no trivial function because the words *are* the story; without the words there would be no story. At some point between the adulatory sagas of Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson and the ironical style of *Morkinskinna* the Icelanders seem to have reconceived themselves as the voice of Norwegian history, in effect to have taken possession of Norwegian history. They converted passive reporting into active formulation. They accordingly allotted an important role to such

Icelandic spokesmen and skilled practitioners of the word as Sniping Halli.

Two other stories in the cluster at the end of the long saga about Haraldr harðráði reinforce the ability of Icelanders to manage both words and events suggested in the tale of Sniping Halli. In the story of Stúfr the Blind King Haraldr arrives unexpectedly at the residence of a farmer who is entertaining Stúfr as a winter guest.¹¹ Stúfr is the son of one of Snorri the Chieftain's foster sons and a descendant of the celebrated Guðrún, daughter of Ósvífr, best known from *Laxdæla saga*. He therefore has a distinguished lineage in Iceland. His first exchange with King Haraldr plays on the cognomen of Haraldr's farmer father Sigurðr Sow compared to his own ancestry. It therefore recalls Halldórr Snorrason's claim of genealogical equality with King Haraldr's commander at the beginning of the saga and serves to emphasize once more the status of the Icelanders. Despite this implied challenge Stúfr, who is a notable skald, gains Haraldr's favor with the recitation of multiple poems. The scene suggests that the Icelanders were quite conscious of their skaldic accomplishments and quite aware of the fact that this skill gave them special access to Norwegian history. Stúfr is in fact so successful with his recital that King Haraldr goes to the unprecedented length of granting two boons even before learning what the request will be. Stúfr's success demonstrates just how disarming the Icelandic command of the word could be.

The following story about the Icelandic trader Oddr Ófeigsson is more complex.¹² Like parts of the story about Sniping Halli it is a tale of triumphant trickery. Oddr cruises in northern Norwegian waters and, despite his warning not to do so, his men engage in forbidden trade with the Lapps. Oddr's ship is searched by the royal agent Einarr fluga, whom we met in Halli's story, but Oddr is able to conceal the contraband. The ship then comes to the attention of King Haraldr himself, who conducts three successive searches. Once again, with the help of a Norwegian friend named Þorsteinn, Oddr is able to outwit the king and make good his escape.

The conclusion, however, is not an altogether happy one. After his escape and return to Iceland, Oddr imprudently sends Þorsteinn a gift of horses, thus making his collusion clear to King Haraldr. The king retaliates by ordering that Þorsteinn be executed, but such is the man's popularity that he is able to get away and never return.

The story is therefore in part about a special relationship between an Icelander and a Norwegian who escapes the king's authority. We may be reminded of the relationship between Egill and the Norwegian chieftain Arinbjörn in *Egils saga* or the relationship between Halldórr Snorrason and his Norwegian friend Bárðr earlier in the saga of King Haraldr. The message seems to be that, although Icelanders may be at odds with the Norwegian king, they may nonetheless have stalwart supporters in Norway. The Icelandic relationship to Norway is not contingent on the king, and a special association between Icelandic and Norwegian men of high standing may transcend loyalty to the king.

There is a passage in *Morkinskinna* that takes special note of King Haraldr's assistance to Iceland in a time of famine.¹³ The passage could be taken to signal the Icelandic author's approval of the king, but the situation may be more complicated. It is often pointed out that the semi-independent stories about Icelanders in *Morkinskinna* cluster predominantly in the saga of King Haraldr harðráði; see for example the back of the dust jacket in the recent edition of *Morkinskinna* (ÍF 23).¹⁴ I am not, however, aware that scholars have posed the question of why this should be so. As we have seen, the rather numerous stories about Icelanders raise questions about King Haraldr. They may constitute a considerably more reserved view of the king than the isolated passage on the Icelandic famine.

That history could take a jaundiced view of King Haraldr is strikingly illustrated by Adam of Bremen's contemporary *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, which gives a negative review of Haraldr's rule. Adam was of course writing from the viewpoint of Denmark, where Haraldr's raiding activities will have left decidedly negative memories. Adam twice adverts to the idea that Haraldr extended his tyranny to Iceland.¹⁵ There is nothing in the abundant Icelandic sources to support such a contention, but it is clear from all the sagas touching on Haraldr that he, in contrast to his predecessor King Magnús, conducted an aggressive foreign policy, especially in Denmark and England. Adam adds Orkney, and Haraldr's campaign against Hákon Ívarsson takes place in Sweden. It is therefore by no means improbable that Haraldr may have cast a colonial eye toward Iceland, as Óláfr Haraldsson had done in the past and Hákon Hákonarson would do again in the thirteenth century. Annexation may have been a recurrent plank in the Norwegian

platform. If that is the case, it is not surprising that the Icelanders cultivated a store of somewhat acidic tales about King Haraldr. Stories about disaffected Icelanders were also destined to surface in the saga of Óláfr Haraldsson in *Heimskringla*, and here too they were colored by dissent.¹⁶

Although the stories of a compromised king are concentrated in the saga of Haraldr harðráði, there are similarly weighted stories in the latter part of *Morkinskinna*. The most pointed of these is the story of the Norwegian in the Swedish borderland (Bohuslän) named Sveinki Steinarsson.¹⁷ The story is attached to the reign of Magnús berfœttr, who in some way resembles Haraldr harðráði and reenacts his career. He brooks no internal dissent and is aggressive on the foreign front in Sweden, Denmark, and the British Isles. Magnús is eager to bring the independent chieftain Sveinki to heel and dispatches three highly placed delegates to impose his will and collect taxes. At the local assembly meeting an unidentified man (who turns out to be Sveinki himself) rises to voice not altogether transparent proverbs that clearly deprecate the king and his delegates. After a third more threatening demand Sveinki sheds his disguise, denounces the king's messengers as thieves and cowards in a long, disparaging tirade, then gives the order to attack. The king's delegates must flee for their lives.

This denunciation of royal authority echoes the confrontation between the people's representatives and the Swedish king Óláfr Eiríksson in the version of Óláfr Haraldsson's saga found in *Heimskringla*.¹⁸ Here too the people wield the decisive word, and royalty must acquiesce. The episode in *Heimskringla* is consigned to the remoteness of Sweden, but to the extent that we may generalize the antagonism between king and subjects, we can apply it to the Norwegian king as well. The hostility between the Norwegian king and his district chieftains is one of the themes in the saga of Óláfr Haraldsson and leads ultimately to the king's fall at Stiklarstaðir. The story of Sveinki Steinarsson recapitulates this conflict in a somewhat altered form; instead of a situation in which the people's spokesmen triumph over the Swedish king, we find a confrontation in which a chieftain, speaking the language of the people in a particularly unfiltered version, demeans the king's representatives. The people's delegate Emundr at the Swedish court speaks to the king in metaphors that must later be deciphered. Sveinki decipheres his own popular

proverbs in a most uncompromising and damaging way. In both confrontations the forms of address escalate from cautious indirection to outright condemnation.

Initial moderation is the required style in dealing with kings. Sniping Halli's liberties at the court of King Haraldr have caused him to be compared to the European court jester because any approach to the king demands special license.¹⁹ A good example is found in the story of Brandr Vermundarson, who, confronted by the king's repeated and excessive extraction of gifts, replies not a word but eventually sends him a one-sleeved cloak that prompts him to deduce that he is being accused of having only an arm to take and no arm to give. The same sort of charade recurs in the story of Stúfr the Blind, who contrives to make the king guess at what Stúfr is suggesting about the king's ancestry. Riddles are a proper way to make contact with a king because they avoid dangerous directness and at the same time flatter the king's intelligence.

If a direct affront to the king becomes necessary, it must also be neutralized. Thus Auðunn is put in the position of declining to give King Haraldr his polar bear, but he later repairs their relationship by making a brilliantly worded presentation and bestowing a lavish gift.²⁰ Personal negotiation is a universal theme in the sagas; whether at law, in amity, in enmity, or in negotiating with kings one must weigh one's words carefully and strike just the right balance between diffidence and firmness.²¹ The sagas suggest that this was an art in which the Icelanders excelled.

The story of Sveinki is a two-act play, or, if we give the aftermath equal weight, a three-act play. The first act ends in a fierce confrontation, the second act negotiates the differences, and the third act provides the resolution. King Magnús clearly cannot accept the humiliation of his ambassadors or his own loss of face. He therefore sets sail for the east, recruits three district chieftains, and marches against Sveinki, who is well armed and prepared for battle. At this point the three district leaders offer the king their services in negotiating a peaceful settlement. They make their way three times between the opposing lines bearing offers of compromise. Each time they slightly misrepresent the demands of the opponents so as to mollify their hard positions and make the terms offered by each less unacceptable to the other. Both Sveinki and the king suspect that there is some

manipulation afoot, but they accede. That is the point. Both want a settlement, but neither wants to surrender an iota of authority. It is up to the negotiators to read these sensibilities correctly and arrange what both leaders want secretly but cannot agree to openly. It is the negotiators who are the heroes of the story, and negotiation is the most crucial value. Negotiation trumps rank. As the story of Auðunn and his polar bear, and indeed *Valla-Ljóts saga* as well, illustrate, the Icelanders must have thought of themselves as, and aspired to be, skilled negotiators.

King Magnús berfœttr meets his death in an ill-conceived invasion of Ireland and is succeeded by his three sons Sigurðr jórsalafari, Eysteinn, and Óláfr. Óláfr dies young, leaving his older brothers Sigurðr (1103–30) and Eysteinn (1103–23) to share the throne. Their reign is the occasion of yet another elaborate negotiation involving King Sigurðr and the district chieftain Sigurðr Hranason. This time the contention is not political but personal. King Sigurðr sends Sigurðr Hranason's brother-in-law Ívarr abroad on a pretext, then proceeds to take Ívarr's wife (and Sigurðr Hranason's sister), the beautiful Sigríðr, to bed. Sigurðr Hranason reacts angrily and tells King Sigurðr in no uncertain words that he deserves none of the great honor he enjoys.²² The king retaliates by calling Sigurðr Hranason a thief, with the justification that he has appropriated too much of the Lapp tax that he has been licensed to collect. Sigurðr denies the charge firmly and is surely innocent, but he feels imperiled and leaves the court to seek the protection of King Eysteinn. In the meantime King Sigurðr continues to rage and brings a suit against Sigurðr Hranason for the alleged theft.

It emerges that King Eysteinn is considerably more skilled in the law than his brother and therefore leads the defense. There is a great deal of quibbling over the proper venue for the case, and Eysteinn is able to quash three successive initiatives at three different locations. When King Sigurðr still persists, Eysteinn invokes a rule to the effect that a charge cannot be brought again after it has been disallowed three times. King Sigurðr departs in wrath, and, although the legalities have been exhausted, there is every prospect that the quarrel will continue. At this point Sigurðr Hranason takes matters into his own hands and throws himself on King Sigurðr's mercy in order to prevent a national crisis arising from the enmity of two kings. King Sigurðr

imposes an enormous payment of fifteen gold marks, five to each king (Óláfr is still alive), with Óláfr and Eysteinn to be paid first. Sigurðr Hranason borrows five marks and approaches first Óláfr, then Eysteinn, but both make him a gift of their shares, freeing him to offer the five marks to King Sigurðr. The king, chastened by the generosity of his brothers, also chooses to make a gift of the money to Sigurðr Hranason and put an end to the dispute.

At the bottom of the system of negotiation in the sagas is the law, and that substructure rises to the surface in the story of Sigurðr Hranason. But the law is not the solution. Indeed, King Eysteinn's secretive manipulation of the law is not much more admirable than King Sigurðr's unjustified charge against Sigurðr Hranason. As in the story of Sveinki Steinarsson we are confronted with leaders who will not give an inch. The law cannot heal the division, only the superior diplomacy of the falsely charged Sigurðr Hranason, who is willing to endure the humiliation that neither of the principals can stomach. Like the negotiators in the story of Sveinki he brings the dispute to a peaceable conclusion. Toward the end of the century *Njáls saga* will reinforce the idea that peace is not in the law but in personal values that transcend the law.²³

The study of the kings' sagas has more often focused on how the texts relate to one another than on the kings themselves. This priority is dictated partly by the need to establish a literary chronology before extracting a historical narrative and partly by the failure of the kings' sagas to provide much insight into the royal personalities. King Magnús berfœttr is a case in point. There is only one brief characterization, which does no more than summarize the story: "King Magnús became a great chieftain when he became the sole king of Norway, a commanding man and severe, both at home and abroad."²⁴ About all we can say about Magnús is that he is warlike. He begins his career by imposing his rule on the people in the region of Trondheim, who have declared in favor of a rival for the throne, a certain Sveinn. This is an echo of the aspirations for independence that were an important theme in the reign of Haraldr harðráði and led to the killing of the Þrændalög chieftain Einarr þambarskelfir. Magnús concludes his campaign by hanging the dissident chieftains Steigar-Þórir and Egill of Forland. Steigar-Þórir has a long history of ambiguous, not to say duplicitous, behavior and may not engage the

reader's sympathy greatly, but Egill is another matter. He is a valiant and upstanding gentleman who is admired by everyone, even King Magnús, though too late. His death confers no credit on the king, who is so angry that his councilors do not dare to intercede for Egill. Unlike the councilors in the story of Sveinki, they do not take matters into their own hands. Both stories illustrate that Magnús is a choleric personality who stands in need of judicious advisers.

The remainder of Magnús's saga is about warfare. He raids in Danish territory in Halland, mounts a major expedition in and off Scotland, and conducts an unsuccessful campaign in Sweden, where his forces must surrender to King Ingi. The hostilities conclude with a meeting of the three Scandinavian monarchs and a surprisingly easy peace agreement, but Magnús's temperament undergoes no change as a result of this pleasing solution.²⁵ On the contrary, in the style of his grandfather Haraldr harðráði he undertakes an ill-advised campaign to the west, this time to Ireland, where he falls in battle. He leaves behind a record as a redoubtable, if not always victorious, warrior, but quite unlike his father Óláfr kyrri he reigns neither long nor peaceably.

Magnús's warrior genes are passed along to his son Sigurðr jórsalafari, memorable chiefly for an astonishing expedition through the Mediterranean, but this early success is not duplicated by his subsequent reign. A prophet in Constantinople foretells that his life will be shaped like the lion, stout in the forequarters but tapering in the hindquarters.²⁶ Sigurðr, like Magnús, is choleric, as his dispute with Sigurðr Hranason illustrates, but in his case that trait is transformed into a mental condition that produces fits of madness in later life. No direct link is suggested, but the warrior life does trace a trajectory of declining fortunes in both Magnús and Sigurðr jórsalafari. Sigurðr's brother Eysteinn fares a bit better because he devotes himself to improving institutions in Norway, as is emphasized in a famous flyting in which the two brothers compare their accomplishments.²⁷ On the other hand, Eysteinn's legal machinations against his brother do not place him above suspicion. In analogy to Magnús berfœttr's prudent advisers, Sigurðr jórsalafari's jarl Sigurðr Hranason emerges as the correct appraiser of the situation and the real leader.

Advice is a major theme in *Morkinskinna* from beginning to end.²⁸ The saga begins with an account of King Magnús Ólafsson, who is recalled to the throne while still under age and is therefore fostered by Einarr þambarskelfir and, to a lesser degree, Kálfr Árnason. Much of

the decision-making would appear to lie in their hands. The critical moment is when Magnús comes of age and begins to contemplate revenge against the people in Þrændalög who rose against his father and killed him at Stiklarstaðir. Before this can transpire, another important adviser enters the scene in the person of the Icelandic skald Sighvatr Þórðarson, who is commissioned to talk reason to Magnús in an extended poem, much of which is quoted. The author of the story dwells on this delivery with particular fondness, presumably because it dramatizes the moment at which the Norwegian king yields to Icelandic guidance and goes on to become the most unblemished of the kings in early Norwegian history. It is Icelandic advice that smooths the way for him.

This pattern recurs at the end of the extant portion of *Morkinskinna*. The last three kings to be commemorated are Sigurðr, Eysteinn, and Ingi, the sons of Haraldr gilli. They also come to the throne under age and get along well enough as long as their foster fathers are alive and can hold them in check. But when they mature, they part ways and join conflict. The manuscript is incomplete and does not transmit the final details, but they were probably quite similar to what we find in *Heimskringla*. We know in any event that Ingi Haraldsson survives longest and benefits from the advice of Grégóriús Dagsson, whose decisive intervention brings about the fall of King Sigurðr. The third brother, Eysteinn, is killed by a pursuer who is cast as something of a freelance assassin, on whom much opprobrium is heaped, although we cannot be sure how unimplicated Ingi really is. In any event, it seems clear that Ingi wins out in some measure because he has the best adviser.

In the central part of the compilation by far the greatest space is devoted to the career of King Haraldr harðráði. During his early adventures in the Mediterranean he has two very noteworthy lieutenants, Halldórr Snorrason and Úlfr Óspaksson, both of them Icelanders. They were presumably not only great warriors but also important advisers to their Norwegian overlord. But when Haraldr is installed as king, he seems to make a special point of not taking advice. A vivid example is a mishap at sea. Halldórr warns the king that he is headed straight for a skerry and should change course, but Haraldr ignores the advice and fetches up on the skerry. In addition the king proves to be ungrateful for Halldórr's earlier services and fails to pay out a proper reward in full. The result is a falling out

and a hostile parting. It redounds to the credit of King Magnús that he heeds an Icelander's advice and therefore to the discredit of King Haraldr that he refuses to do so.²⁹

Icelanders are omnipresent in *Morkinskinna* and constitute a compelling reason for supposing Icelandic authorship. Their role is most conspicuous in the adjunct stories in which an Icelander comes to the Norwegian court and becomes involved in dealings with the king. The question we might pose is whether these episodes, probably transmitted as independent stories, have some advisory function in the text as a whole. As noted above, the story of Halldórr Snorrason can be understood in part as a critique of a Norwegian king who does not know how to reward a valuable Icelandic retainer. The humorous tales of Hreiðarr and Sniping Halli may in turn be understood as parodies that appear to accede to Norwegian prejudices about Icelanders only to countermand them by revealing the sagacity hidden beneath a clownish exterior. These two characters might also be taken to lampoon the elegance of Norwegian court life by contrasting it to the common touch cultivated in Iceland. King Magnús responds in an exemplary way, King Haraldr rather more falteringly. When Sniping Halli is compared to a court jester, we should remember that the jester at his best is an educational figure, licensed to tell the truth, if only obliquely. Hreiðarr and Sniping Halli may act the fool, but they are worth listening to.

In the stories of Stúfr the Blind and the anonymous Icelander who tells the tale of Haraldr harðráði's early adventures, we are shown that the Icelanders have a rich store of poetry and history, enough to rivet a Norwegian audience for long hours. In short, the Icelanders are the bearers of tradition and the caretakers of literature. The adventure story told at Haraldr's court is particularly important because it demonstrates that the Icelandic version of history is correct. The Icelanders are not just storytellers but conveyers of the truth, and that is a high calling. In addition to their intellectual contribution, the Icelanders have practical gifts, for example Hreiðarr's spontaneous skills in handicraft.³⁰ In the tale of Ásu-Pórðr, which we have not reviewed here, the protagonist proves to be an outstanding international trader who can hold his own against difficult odds and some local disapproval in Norwegian society. Oddr Ófeigsson is able to evade the Norwegian policing of the Lapp trade and trick the king

himself in the course of secreting the contraband assembled by his crew against his better advice.

Surely the most ambitious, as well as self-aggrandizing, stories are those of Brandr Vermundarson the Open-Handed and Auðunn with his polar bear. As we saw above, Brandr is able to instruct King Haraldr on courtly etiquette without uttering a word. Over time the Norwegians evolved formal rules to govern approaches to the king, and they set some of them down in a treatise in the middle of the century.³¹ But the Icelanders, though less accustomed to the royal presence, would also have developed various forms of circumspection. These would have included understatement, oblique wording, or even wordlessness. Auðunn is also a man of few words, except for a brief burst of eloquence at the very end, but his mission turns out to be even more exalted because it is a matter of international diplomacy. Auðunn is able to kindle a glimmer of understanding between the two archenemies King Haraldr of Norway and King Sveinn (Svend) of Denmark.

In assessing *Morkinskinna* we must read the tone as well as the content. The characterization of the kings and the interspersed adjunct stories about Icelanders are opinion pieces that amount to a commentary on the kings. With the writing of *Morkinskinna* the composition of kings' sagas is no longer an exercise in eulogy or a chronicling of military clashes but has become a critical, even subversive, analysis. As *Fagrskinna* will show, however, critical evaluations could cut different ways.

Fagrskinna

The research on *Fagrskinna* has been relatively quiet, not for lack of interest but because a century ago in 1917 Gustav Indrebø wrote a magisterial treatise that addressed most of the important questions.³² On major matters he arrived at conclusions that have stood the test of time remarkably well. He established that *Fagrskinna* is a digest of written sources with only slight and occasional recourse to oral traditions. He suggested a date around 1225, and no one has deviated much from that suggestion. On the old question of whether *Fagrskinna* is Icelandic or Norwegian he offered the compromise solution that the author was an Icelander working under Norwegian

auspices in the Prændaløg region. That still strikes me as the most plausible solution.

He also showed that the author leaned heavily on *Morkinskinna* and argued that the latter part of *Heimskringla* made use of *Fagrskinna*, although the earlier parts did not. Perhaps the least compelling argument is that *Fagrskinna* was composed under the patronage of King Hákon Hákonarson. Indrebø detected a strong bias against Jarl Skúli Bárðarson, but we will see that Skúli could also be cast as the patron.³³ There is in any case no doubt that the text betrays a strong Norwegian and a strong royalist perspective.

We have seen that the point of view in *Morkinskinna* is quite clearly Icelandic, to the extent that the book might be considered a dual Icelandic/Norwegian project somewhat distanced from the Norwegian kings, who are the sole concern of the *Fagrskinna* author.³⁴ In the latter book the Icelandic presence has disappeared almost completely; there are no adjunct stories about Icelanders and there is only one reference to Icelanders. It is copied out of *Morkinskinna* [*Flateyjarbók*] and notes the importance of Icelandic poems as sources: “There is a great saga of King Haraldr [harðráði] set down in the poems that Icelanders presented to him.”³⁵ The role of Icelanders is in fact confined to the use of their verse. There is no other reference to their authorial capacity despite the fact that all the prose sources for *Fagrskinna* were Icelandic sagas or compilations: Ari (?), Saemundr (?), **Hryggjarstykki*, *Ágrip*, Oddr Snorrason’s *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, the *Oldest Saga of Saint Olaf*, **Hlaðajarla saga*, *Jómsvíkinga saga*, and *Morkinskinna*. *Fagrskinna* is simply a composite and a consolidation of all the Icelandic narratives available around 1225, and that may give us a clue about the underlying motivation for the work.

Perhaps some high-ranking Norwegian knew that there was an extensive literature on the Norwegian kings available in Iceland and undertook to sponsor an epitome for use in Norway. The most logical author of such an epitome would have been an Icelander who knew both the prose works and the verse tradition. We have seen that there would have been no scarcity of Icelanders in Trondheim, and one or another of them may have been qualified to assemble such a book.³⁶ The task would have required a full library of Icelandic texts, and we may ask whether this library would have been available in Trondheim or whether the commissioned author would have had to return to Iceland either to carry out the project there or to bring

the missing books back to Norway. The preparations could have been quite elaborate. However the project was organized, it seems clear that it was well defined and perhaps tightly supervised by the Norwegian sponsor or sponsors. The commission entailed both radical and consistent abbreviation, which is most obvious in the use of *Morkinskinna*, and a rigid adherence to a favorable portraiture of the Norwegian monarchs.

This positive bias is first and most obviously in evidence in the section on Haraldr hárfagri, which contrasts with the mixed reviews of Haraldr in the Icelandic sources, notably *Egils saga* and to a lesser extent the first part of *Heimskringla*.³⁷ The Icelandic reservations about Haraldr stem from his perceived tyranny in dealing with Norwegian chieftains, who either succumb or are forced into exile, in some cases to become Icelanders with jaundiced memories. *Fagrskinna* is colored neither by provincial dreams of independence in the separate regions of Norway nor by adverse memories in Iceland. Haraldr hárfagri's sons, Eiríkr blóðøx and Hákon góði, are also vindicated in comparison to earlier accounts. Like other writers, the author of *Fagrskinna* chooses to exculpate Eiríkr and inculcate his wife Gunnhildr. He also frees Eiríkr from the implications of his cognomen "bloodax," usually explained by his killing of his brothers.³⁸ Instead, this author attributes the name to Eiríkr's career as a fierce viking (ÍF 29:79). In the case of Eiríkr's brother and successor Hákon, the only blot on his record is that he participates in heathen sacrificial rituals in Möerr. According to the author of *Fagrskinna*, however, his participation is motivated only by good will (ÍF 29:80). At the moment of death he repents not only of this breach but also of his differences with his kinsmen (ÍF 29:94).³⁹

An instance of vindication on a par with the story of Haraldr hárfagri is the section on Hákon jarl Sigurðarson. His trickery is masked by an entertaining narrative in which he outwits his Danish rivals, an episode quite in line with the anti-Danish sentiment that Indrebø isolates in *Fagrskinna*.⁴⁰ The author does not dwell on Hákon's paganism, which haunts a number of other sources, and suppresses the compromising details of his death in a pigsty.⁴¹ In retelling the story of Óláfr Tryggvason the author had a book-sized account by Oddr Snorrason at his disposal, but, true to the mandate of brevity, he reduced the dimensions to a mere eighteen pages in the ÍF edition, including the space required to explicate sixteen stanzas.

A remarkable change that Indrebø does not comment on is the elimination of all the conversion details in Oddr's saga. The author of *Fagrskinna* is aware of these activities and refers to them obliquely: "About this Christian mission there were many and protracted tales before this great benefit came about."⁴² This omission suppresses the least attractive part of Óláfr Tryggvason's career, his torture and execution of pagan countrymen. In Oddr's account a Norwegian king is pitted against other Norwegians, but in *Fagrskinna* it is tempting to believe that the national principle overrides the religious principle and that the author wishes to avoid any trace of internecine conflict. This instinct is also in line with the author's secular orientation and his downplaying of religious themes.

The secular emphasis is most palpable in the section on Saint Óláfr. Saga readers are accustomed to the idea that Óláfr Haraldsson was the all-important figure in the history of the Norwegian kings. Not only was he the subject of two of the earliest royal biographies, the *Oldest Saga* and the *Legendary Saga*, but his position in *Heimskringla* overshadows all the other kings before and after him, both in length and depth. Here the other kings' lives are secondary to the point of being only a prelude or a postlude to the central figure of Saint Óláfr. Indrebø was somewhat uncertain about what version the author of *Fagrskinna* used as a source, whether it was the largely lost *Oldest Saga*, the extant *Legendary Saga*, or the almost entirely lost version by Styrmir Kárasen.⁴³ If it was the *Legendary Saga*, the secularization of that text is remarkably extensive and consistent. We have observed that the *Legendary Saga* falls rather neatly into discrete sections, the first a political account of Óláfr's rise to power and the second an account of his approaching fall with an emphasis on his religious devotion and a focus on miracles. Thus, if the *Legendary Saga* as a whole was the source, it is evident that the author of *Fagrskinna* systematically cut away the second part.

The alternative possibility is that the author of *Fagrskinna* worked from a redaction of the *Oldest Saga* that did not include the religious aspects, and that these intonations are the specific additions of the author responsible for the *Legendary Saga*. There is no way of demonstrating that the latter part of the *Legendary Saga* was as faithful to the *Oldest Saga* as the earlier chapters. If the author of *Fagrskinna* used a secular version of the *Oldest Saga*, he persisted

in that style, but if he used a text akin to the *Legendary Saga*, he resolutely pruned away the religious material just as he did in the story of Óláfr Tryggvason.⁴⁴ In both cases he seems to have opted for a political account rather than a celebration of Christian allegiance. We do not know whether this viewpoint was imposed by a secular sponsor or by the author's own priorities, but it is difficult to suppose that the auspices were ecclesiastical, as they seem to have been in the case of *Ágrip*.

Another notable feature of the section on Óláfr Haraldsson is the total exclusion of Icelanders. As Indrebø summed it up: "The Icelanders, about whom the *Legendary Saga* tells so much, as usual get no mention; only their poems are included."⁴⁵ Indrebø notes in particular that Þormóðr Bersason, who plays such an important role toward the end of Óláfr's story, is not so much as named. We will see below that such omissions raise interesting questions about the orientation and plan of the *Fagrskinna* author.

In *Morkinskinna* the lives of King Magnús Ólafsson and King Haraldr Sigurðarson are interwoven, but in *Fagrskinna* they are dealt with separately and in succession. Indrebø noted that Magnús was the "godliest" king in the text, but he is perhaps not so much godly as a model of moral rectitude.⁴⁶ As Indrebø points out, the author follows and approves the depiction found in *Morkinskinna* rather than creating an independent portrait. The portrait of Haraldr Sigurðarson, however, is altogether different and is calculated to suppress a whole series of negative traits found in *Morkinskinna*. As Indrebø contends, "It is hard to point out an episode or a single sentence that contains something deprecatory about King Haraldr."⁴⁷ The most compromising narrative on Haraldr in *Morkinskinna* is the story of his interaction with the great chieftain Einarr þambarskelfir, whom he envies and eventually murders, together with his son Eindriði, in a darkened council chamber. The author of *Fagrskinna* systematically reduces the king's culpability to whatever extent he can.

The exoneration of royal behavior is less evident in the later sections, but there are persistent examples. Thus the author of *Fagrskinna* drops the story of Sveinki Steinarsson, which was so clearly detrimental to the reputation of King Magnús berfœtr (Bareleg) in *Morkinskinna*. He also excises the episodes that diminish the standing of Sigurðr

jórsalafari in his later years, including the symptoms of madness, and he modifies the invidious comparisons of King Ingi and his brothers Sigurðr and Eysteinn that are a regular feature of the other sources.

It emerges from what has been said that the three most conspicuous innovations in *Fagrskinna* are abbreviation, the downplaying of Icelandic contributions, and a pro-Norwegian, pro-royal intervention on the part of the author. All three of these biases may shed light on the project as a whole. Condensation may be the easiest aspect to interpret. We can guess that the author (or sponsor) found himself confronted by an array of disparate texts with or without overlap. He seems to have wished to combine them into a surveyable overview of manageable proportions, not a pocket narrative like *Ágrip* and not a poly-volume recapitulation such as would have accrued from a combination of Oddr Snorrason's *Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*, the *Oldest Saga of Saint Olaf*, and *Morkinskinna*. If we ask for whom such a digest would have been appropriate, the answer might be a Norwegian rather than an Icelandic audience. Educated Icelanders would have had fairly ready access to all the texts in question (as the author or authors of *Heimskringla* did) and would not have needed what amounts to something like a schoolbook anthology. A Norwegian audience, on the other hand, would not have had such ready access to the length and breadth of Icelandic historiography and is more likely to have had a more incomplete sample. They are the readership most likely to have profited from a handy condensation.

More puzzling is the almost willful silence on the Icelandic origins of the book. There is no prologue as in Oddr Snorrason's book, as there may have been in *Ágrip* if we had the first leaves of the extant manuscript, as there is in *Sverris saga*, and as there will be in *Heimskringla*. Hence there is no comment on sources. Even in the Latin history by Saxo and in Theodoricus's little synopsis there is some acknowledgment of Icelandic expertise, enough to suggest that the Icelandic command of history was widely known.⁴⁸ In *Fagrskinna* therefore the silence seems to go beyond mere omission and has the appearance of deliberate policy. All the sources utilized by the author are full of allusions to Icelandic poets and stories, but such references are never reproduced. This policy suggests not mere negligence but a planned appropriation without acknowledgment, a borrowing of Icelandic material in an attempt to make it appear Norwegian.

If we inquire into the motivation for such an appropriation, we may begin by observing that by far the most extensive source for *Fagrskinna* was *Morkinskinna*. *Morkinskinna* showed the way by combining individual biographies into a compendious overview.⁴⁹ That was clearly the model for *Fagrskinna*. But *Morkinskinna* was not just a narrative model; it was also a self-consciously Icelandic account, the first major compilation of Icelandic stanzas and an unabashed wellspring of Icelandic storytelling. The author of *Fagrskinna* knew it line by line, and it is easy to believe that the author, or the Norwegian sponsor, was alive to the quite unapologetic Icelandic orientation; so alive in fact that one or the other reacted against the proprietary Icelandic overtones in *Morkinskinna* and undertook to write an account of Norwegian history free of such inflections. This possibility suggests much about how the original saga readers could read not only texts but subtexts, and could choose to respond to one or both. It may also tell us something about the delicacy of national consciousness at the time.

We come now to the third major factor in the *Fagrskinna* author's program of revision, the vindication of Norwegian monarchs. We have seen how the author faithfully retains all the positive characteristics attributed to kings and how regularly he tempers or removes negative characteristics. There is a clear patriotic bias, a peculiarity summed up by Indrebø with the words: "The author of *Fagrskinna* consistently adopts a strict national point of view."⁵⁰ It also leads him to the conclusion that the project was undertaken under the royal auspices of King Hákon Hákonarson, but there are some difficulties in this hypothesis. In the first place, King Hákon was born in 1204 and was still a young man in the period 1223–25 when *Fagrskinna* seems most likely to have been planned and initiated. We do not know at what age he developed literary interests, and it is only a surmise that he was personally involved in the translation of *Tristrams saga* in 1226; his name could have been attached to the book by others.⁵¹ In the second place, in the period 1223–27 King Hákon was much preoccupied with a stubborn campaign against the Ribbungar in eastern Norway. In these years he seems to have been rarely in Bergen and never in Trondheim, where *Fagrskinna* is most likely to have been conceived and where Icelandic books are most likely to have been available. On the other hand, Jarl Skúli appears to have resided in Trondheim in 1223–25, and his sympathies could have been no less royalist than

Hákon's since he pressed his territorial claims as late as 1223 and asserted his claim to the throne in 1239.⁵²

Skúli would also have had good access to Icelandic literature because he hosted Snorri Sturluson in 1218–19 and again in 1219–20.⁵³ Literature would surely have been among their topics of conversation. At the same time there would have been tensions because of the trade dispute that had been under way since 1215. A Norwegian had been murdered in northern Iceland, and *Íslendinga saga* states in so many words that “the Norwegians were very hostile to the Icelanders.”⁵⁴ The hostility was in fact such that Jarl Skúli planned to dispatch a large fleet to Iceland in reprisal.⁵⁵ The plan is only averted when Snorri promises his good offices in persuading the Icelanders to submit to the “Norwegian chieftains.” The plural form “chieftains” is significant because it embraces Jarl Skúli as well as King Hákon. Skúli had presumably not yet abandoned his royal aspirations and would have been just as invested in the history of the Norwegian kings as Hákon. The period 1220–23 would thus have been a moment quite conducive to a literary initiative that was Norwegian and royalist in outlook and tacitly anti-Icelandic.

The relationship between *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna* may suggest something about how the Icelanders and Norwegians interacted personally in the 1220s. They presumably had interlocking but divergent points of view about their perspectives on the two countries. *Fagrskinna* gives us some idea of what the Norwegian side of the conversation may have sounded like, but what would the Icelandic response have been? *Morkinskinna* gives us good access to the Icelandic view of Norwegian history, but there is another equally important document. If *Egils saga* was written before *Fagrskinna*, it had established a view of King Haraldr hárfagri quite at odds with the admiring portrait in *Fagrskinna*; if the author of *Fagrskinna* knew it, we can imagine that he reacted against it. If *Egils saga* was written later, it may be viewed as countermanding the positive slant in *Fagrskinna*.

A more direct Icelandic response to what we find in *Fagrskinna* is the fullest of the medieval Icelandic histories from this period, *Heimskringla*. Indrebø argued that the author, whether it is Snorri or not, made use of the latter parts of *Fagrskinna*.⁵⁶ The central section on Saint Óláfr is so much more elaborate in *Heimskringla*

than in the abbreviated account in *Fagrskinna* that there was no need to refer to the latter. The author of *Heimskringla* would have simply set it aside because he had a much greater project in mind. We could, however, imagine a concession to *Fagrskinna* in the emphasis that the author of *Heimskringla* places on Óláfr's secular achievements and his curtailing of the hagiographic elements. On the other hand, the author takes a very different tack with respect to the Icelandic sources that are so demonstrably passed over in silence in *Fagrskinna*. He appears to make a special project of adding and expanding the stories about Icelanders who were held hostage by Óláfr Haraldsson, and he greatly enhances the diplomatic roles allotted to Sigvatr Þórðarson and Hjalti Skeggjason at the Norwegian and Swedish courts.⁵⁷

I have commented elsewhere on the third part of *Heimskringla* as a response to *Morkinskinna* and concluded that the author of *Heimskringla* regularly modifies the implied critique of kings found in his source.⁵⁸ Thus he is somewhat less adulatory about Magnús góði and more indulgent about Haraldr harðráði; he does not use the former to cast shadows on the latter. Similarly he follows the example of *Fagrskinna* in omitting the tale of the chieftain Sveinki Steinarsson's humiliation of Magnús berfœttr's emissaries and thus spares the king's reputation. He also moderates the contrast between Sigurðr jórsalafari and his brother Eysteinn by downplaying the symptoms of madness in the former. These small adjustments can be understood as corrections to *Morkinskinna*, but they might also be understood as further concessions to *Fagrskinna* and an attempt to compromise with the Norwegian orientation in that text. The relationship among the three compendia is therefore not just a matter of borrowing but to some extent also an ideological debate with a consciousness of national identities. An Icelandic author seized the initiative in *Morkinskinna*, but an Icelandic writer in Norwegian employ refocused the portraiture of kings in *Fagrskinna*, while the author of *Heimskringla* tried to find a middle ground acknowledging both the Icelandic literary claims and an elevated level of respect for the Norwegian kings.

